Joint IO in Counterinsurgency Warfare:
A Critical Gap in Capability

By Lane V. Packwood, Major, USA

Editorial Abstract: MAJ Packwood examines the challenges of carrying out an influence campaign at the operational level, especially given current counterinsurgency demands. He argues that while our ability to conceptualize and synchronize information operations improves, we need to revise IO culture through new guidance and behaviors.

Counterinsurgency warfare (COIN) is now a subject of utmost importance within the Army and Marine Corps. Afghanistan and Iraq have refocused attention on this particular form of conflict as it fits into the Range of Military Operations, and strategists theorize that such Irregular Warfare may be the rule rather than the exception in the future. As a consequence, both services have published updated COIN doctrines incorporating the hard lessons learned over the past 5 years. Succeeding in shaping the information environment features prominently in the updated doctrines. At the same time information operations has been evolving to provide commanders with this capability. However, while our ability to conceptualize and synchronize IO is improving, current joint IO doctrine does not provide an optimal framework for addressing the most urgent IO need in COIN: influencing a neutral majority of non-combatants to support US objectives. In spite of its widely acknowledged importance, current doctrines and organizational cultures impede us from successfully "winning hearts and minds" in counterinsurgency warfare.

IO in Counterinsurgency Warfare

The 2006 edition of Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, contains the US Army's revised COIN doctrine. According to this reference, an insurgency is "an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control." Counterinsurgency, therefore, is an "internal war." It is "military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency."

These political and psychological actions take a prominent place in FM 3-24 based on a critical assumption about the ideological loyalties of the general population during an insurgency. Between insurgents and counterinsurgents is a larger neutral majority undecided about which side offers a better future. FM 3-24 states that "the primary struggle in an internal war is *to mobilize people…* for political control and legitimacy [italics added]." The real objective is not

COIN warriors at work. (US Marine Corps)

to seize and hold terrain or to decisively defeat enemy formations (although these may be necessary), but to win the support of a "neutral or passive majority" of the population. Both insurgents and counterinsurgents must mobilize this neutral majority to their respective cause in order to ultimately triumph. Because of this, "the information environment is a critical dimension of such internal wars, and insurgents attempt to shape it to their advantage." Thus, the political and psychological struggle to attain legitimacy in the minds of a neutral majority, not the physical destruction of enemy fighters, is the counterinsurgent's supreme imperative.

Therefore, by necessity this neutral majority constitutes a population of non-combatants, although a prominent feature of insurgency is the almost complete lack of distinction between non-combatants and active fighters. Even if this neutral majority gives tacit support to imbedded insurgents for social and cultural reasons, or is likely to do so, FM 3-24 asserts that they can be swayed—indeed, they must be swayed—and therefore occupy a distinct non-combatant role in the battlespace. In fact, if we follow the logic of FM 3-24 to its necessary conclusion, the key measure of effectiveness for a successful COIN is the steady conversion of yesterday's high value targets into tomorrow's loyal allies.

In this environment, FM 3-24 looks to Information Operations as critical to the overall success of the mission. All operations, lethal and non-lethal, must be conducted with an eye on the psychological effect on this population of non-combatants. "Arguably, the decisive battle is for the people's minds; hence synchronizing IO with efforts along the other [logical lines of operations] is critical. Every action, including uses of force, must be wrapped in the bodyguard of information."

A joint Marine Corps-Special Operations Command *Multiservice Concept for Irregular War* is equally emphatic on the importance of IO in influencing non-combatants. This guidance highlights how understanding the role of ideology in a counterinsurgency is "essential to campaign development." "Information operations must infuse all other lines of operation so that every activity creates the correct perception." Commanders must manage perception

in ways that "morally isolate" the enemy (insurgents) from the population (non-combatants) in ways very similar to FM 3-24.

In short, US counterinsurgency doctrine states that it is crucial for IO to influence a neutral majority of non-combatants to support US objectives. This all-important need is echoed by commanders in the field. Colonel Ralph Baker, Commander of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, wrote of his experience in Baghdad:

Soon after taking command of my brigade, I quickly discovered that IO was going to be one of the two most vital tools (along with human intelligence) I would need to be successful in a counterinsurgency campaign. COIN operations meant competing daily to favorably influence the perceptions of the Iraqi population in our area of operations. I quickly concluded that, without IO, I could not hope to shape and set conditions for my battalions or my Soldiers to be successful.

Other commanders at the tactical level consistently remark that IO is essential to garnering support among local populations, in order to make any progress along other lines of operation. "Whoever achieves victory will be the opponent who most effectively conveys his perception of reality and aspirations for the future with a host-nation populace and an international audience" writes one company commander. LtCol Joseph Paschall, Chief of Psychological Operations at Headquarters Marine Corps' Plans, Policies and Operations Division, writes that at the end of the day IO is "influencing the way someone thinks" in order to "build rapport," "form relationships," and "capitalize on good works." To this I add my own experience as a company commander in Kirkuk, Iraq. Influencing the neutral majority of non-combatants to support US objectives was by far our highest priority and one that we struggled with daily.

Joint IO Doctrine

The importance of IO in COIN provides much of the current urgency in updating and improving joint IO doctrine. Joint Publication (JP) 3-13,

"Influencing the neutral majority of non-combatants to support US objectives was by far our highest priority..."

Information Operations, provides a 2006 revision that defines IO as "the integrated employment of electronic warfare (EW), computer network operations (CNO), psychological operations (PSYOP), military deception (MILDEC) and operations security (OPSEC), in concert with specified supporting and related capabilities, to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own." EW, CNO, PSYOP, MILDEC and OPSEC form the five IO core capabilities, with other functions, particularly Public Affairs (PA), providing supporting and related capabilities.

Not every capability within this broad spectrum is equally important in influencing the neutral majority of non-combatants, however. While EW and CNO provide the Joint Task Force (JTF) with very powerful tools for achieving specific effects, their primary use is against adversaries' communication networks, as opposed to non-combatants. Jamming cell-phones and reading emails add a great deal to the fight against insurgents, but it is more difficult to see how they will endear non-combatants to US objectives at the same time. Nor will MILDEC or OPSEC, two very operations-centric capabilities, have a large impact on influencing broad public attitudes in the way COIN doctrine demands.

Two other capabilities provide much more promise: PSYOP and PA. PSYOP in particular seems ideally suited for the task of influencing the neutral majority of non-combatants. DOD defines PSYOP as "planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals." Of all the IO capabilities, this definition of PSYOP seems to fit the bill perfectly.

In practice, however, neither PSYOP doctrine nor organizational culture fully supports influencing the neutral majority in COIN. Doctrinally, PSYOP is actually far more focused on adversarial targets, which in the COIN environment consists of enemy fighters and their direct supporters. The DOD *Information Operations Roadmap* repudiates the above definition, summaring PSYOP as "aggressive behavior modification" of "adversaries (implicitly combatants, regular and irregular, and those who provide them with intelligence, logistics, and other assets in the operational milieu)."

This view is supported by a comprehensive National Defense University study on the uses of PSYOP in Afghanistan and Iraq. Its analysis of the sometimes conflicting Joint and Army PSYOP doctrines "observed that all of the PSYOP objectives enumerated in joint doctrine for both stability operations and major combat operations easily fit into four broad mission objectives." These were "isolating an adversary from domestic and international support," "reducing effectiveness of adversary's forces," "deterring escalation by adversarial leadership," and "minimizing collateral damage and interference with US operations." Notice that three of the four mission objectives are explicitly adversary focused.

One can also see this adversarial focus in PSYOP's historical performance. The NDU study shows PSYOP is very effective in delivering specific messages to specific adversaries at the tactical level, such as delivering leaflets or broadcasts to persuade enemy units to surrender. When thoughtfully integrated into tactical operations, PSYOP can help win engagements and save lives. But when called upon to influence non-adversaries on a wider, more general level, the results are much less clear. The IO imperative in COIN doctrine seems to imply theater-level or "strategic" PSYOP directed and managed at the JTF level to shape the attitudes of a large population of non-combatants.

In IO doctrine, this is the intended role of the Joint Psychological Operations Task Force (JPOTF). Briefly, a JPOTF

is a joint PSYOP cell assigned to a JTF to advise the commander and provide a link between the tactical PSYOP assets supporting maneuver forces, the JTF, and higher supporting assets in the Combatant Command or DOD. In recent COIN operations, commanders have used the JPOTF to provide the theater-level efforts to "convey the legitimacy of US policy and objectives to the general population," which would presumably be an effort to influence the neutral majority. But according to the NDU study, the performance of the JPOTFs in Afghanistan and Iraq has been largely disappointing. Their efforts have been marked by "friction, assessment difficulties, and, at times, a lack of sophistication." Commanders and PSYOP practitioners consistently complain of poor communication between the JPOTF and both higher and lower assets, as well as low product quality, confusion in goals, and ambiguous results.

While some of this is undoubtedly the result of basic resource shortfalls, discrepancies in PSYOP doctrine and organizational culture lie closer to the root cause. At the theater or strategic level, PSYOP starts to blend with PA and public diplomacy, raising several serious doctrinal and policy issues. This difficulty is further exacerbated by organizational culture. Many PSYOP practitioners resist this broader mission, and are ill-trained to do it. Naval War College strategist Carnes Lord writes, "The military PSYOP community has been sensitized over the years to the deep unpopularity of PSYOP in the wider culture." Military and civilian leaders alike tend to look upon PSYOP with a combination of skepticism and suspicion. Lord writes that in response the PSYOP community tends to askew the kinds of campaigns needed for non-combatants, and continues to operate with very risk-adverse product approval processes.

PSYOP then, does not perform in the broad manner described by Joint Doctrine. It does not operate equally against all "foreign audiences." The JPOTF notwithstanding, PSYOP's mission, capabilities and culture make it very adversary focused. Lord argues that "the comparative advantage of PSYOP as a military instrument is clearly on or near the battlefield, in close conjunctions with and support of actual operations or their aftermath." The NDU study supports this conclusion and goes so far as to recommend that PSYOP focus on its tactical adversarial mission objectives and not be looked upon as a tool of public diplomacy or PA (through the JPOTF, for example). Study author Christopher Lamb writes, "PSYOP doctrine and mission statements that could easily be confused with mandates to conduct public diplomacy and public affairs are not helpful."

If PSYOP cannot effectively influence the neutral majority in COIN, can Public Affairs fill the gap? The mission of PA is to "expedite the flow of accurate and timely information about the activities of US joint forces to the public and internal audience." Whereas PSYOP may be ill-suited for shaping attitudes among ambivalent non-combatants, PA seems to naturally operate in this area. PA Officers (PAO) see their primary responsibility as maintaining credibility and truthfulness, two critical advantages in the fight with insurgents for legitimacy. Some in the IO community argue that this makes it "the ultimate IW [information warfare] weapon," precisely since it is "so stalwart in its claims of only speaking the truth."

To a certain degree, the integration of PA into IO Cells in Afghanistan and Iraq reflects this view of PA's role in COIN. Through distinct IO Cells in the JTF staff structure, with designated senior IO staff officers in charge, commanders attempted to comply with the Joint IO Doctrinal vision of "integrated employment." An IO Cell is a natural way of bringing together IO's core, supporting and

"If PSYOP cannot effectively influence the neutral majority in COIN, can Public Affairs fill the gap?"
(Defense Link)

related capabilities, of which PA plays a very public and important part. Some argue that they succeeded too well. Critics allege that several operations actually included attempts to use PA or PA-like activities to conduct MILDEC and PSYOP. Accusations continue that commanders fed false information to the media with the intent of deceiving adversary fighters on the battlefield, who they knew were watching.

As a result, the PA community has strongly resisted this trend. PA's organizational culture does not support this kind of influencing and DOD policies against propagandizing domestic audiences, even inadvertently, place this kind of "integration" in murky legal waters. Many PAOs vehemently object that current joint doctrine "allows influence operations to bleed into public affairs and allow IO officers to use the press as a battlefield tool." LTC Pamela Keeton, former PAO for Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan, writes, "In theory, the idea of merging PA, IO, and PSYOP appears to make sense; in practice, however, the goals of these three functions are quite different. Public Affairs is charged with informing the public with factual, truthful information, while IO and PSYOP seek to influence their audiences to change perceptions or behavior."

In addition, PAOs resist proactive strategic influencing even when it entails nothing but factual, truthful information. Lord writes "it is the nature of the

public affairs function to be reactive rather than proactive and concerned primarily with day-to-day handling of the domestic press." PAOs eschew anything resembling manipulation or "spin," regardless of factual accuracy, and prefer straight-forward, carefully phrased press releases on daily events.

To summarize, in spite of the supreme importance laid out in COIN doctrine of winning the support of neutral non-combatants, joint IO doctrine does not provide commanders with the clear capability to do it. This kind of Information Operation hits a seam in our doctrine. On the one hand, PSYOP is best suited for targeting adversaries in tactical contexts. Its doctrine and organizational culture militate against broad, general influencing and commanders are highly sensitive to PSYOP's stigma in the public eye. On the other hand, PA resists any subordination and integration into what it sees as potentially manipulative influencing operations—and prefers sticking to basic daily fact providing to media contacts.

Solutions

A full-examination of potential solutions to this capabilities gap is beyond the scope of this article. Possibilities include reassessing PA doctrine to make it more amenable to influencing, rather than simply informing, foreign audiences. One line of reasoning focuses on the nature of truth, and casts doubts on PA, or any information source, being able to transmit unbiased truth regardless of its stated intention. "We in the West, and particularly in the United States, tend to believe that there is only one truth and that others see and understand as we do," writes Christine MacNulty in a US Army War College study. "In the Armed Forces, this is known as "mirror-imaging"; in anthropology it is known as ethno-centrism." According to this line of reasoning, PA is naïve in supposing that it can only be involved with simple informing. The very act of informing implies some version of mirror-imaging. It would be best if PA adjusted to integration into a synergistic IO campaign that achieves the commander's intent.

And yet, this is so counter to PA's internal beliefs, and potentially so damaging to public perception of military operations in the domestic press, that few advocate this change. If the association between PA and IO becomes common knowledge, PA risks damaging the integrity, truthfulness, and credibility of its meesage sources and contents.

Others argue that the activities necessary to influence neutral non-combatants require entirely different capabilities at the operational and strategic levels of war than either PA or PSYOP can currently provide. Carnes Lord recommends DOD create an entirely new capability called "defense public diplomacy." This would require a new cadre of public diplomats or communicators within DOD (including the uniformed military), specialized in strategic communication. This would clearly add powerful tools to a JTF commander's IO arsenal, but at enormous cost. Lord's proposal requires a new functional combatant command staffed with hundreds if not thousands of highly educated strategic communicators in and out of uniform. No doubt a leap forward, but one still years (and hundreds of millions of dollars) down the road.

The most pragmatic solutions then, may lie in reforming PSYOP itself. One could go against the recommendation of the NDU study, for example, and continue working on improvements to theater/operational level PSYOP through the JPOTFs. This will require new doctrines, career paths and professional education for PSYOP practitioners, so they can influence complex non-adversarial audiences far better than they do currently. More significantly, it will require a new public persona for PSYOP, one that puts practitioners and observers more at ease with the business of influencing. There does not seem any simple way to delineate where PSYOP ends and public diplomacy or PA begins, especially when dealing with neutral non-combatants. There may not be any clear demarcation, and thus no practical way to assign these different functions to clear "lanes." Before pouring more resources into efforts that many people describe as 'propaganda and manipulation,' PSYOP will have to find some way to portray its efforts as 'marketing' or 'engaging.' It is a subtle difference, but an extraordinarily important one. Ultimately, this last challenge may prove more difficult in the end.